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ABSTRACT

An intern program for teacher trainees at Illinois State University augments the student teaching experience with experience in the surrounding urban community. The urban community experience is used as a vehicle to allow the students to look at their own personal strengths and weaknesses, their willingness to work with others, and their ability to develop cooperative and positive support linkages with their peers, all within the context of an off-campus experience in an urban center. The focus of the program is development of a "group" concept among trainees. In fostering cooperation with each other, sharing, and working through difficult situations or relationships within the group, the mental health of the trainees is strengthened and values are clarified. A discussion is presented of the week-by-week activities and objectives of the program, including feedback, recording of reactions to various situations, individual conferences, and group appraisals. (JD)

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MENTAL HEALTH AND THE INTERN

A TEACHER TRAINING MODEL

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A great emphasis has been placed on the development of Field Experiences for teacher trainees. Many state offices of education now require a field-based experience component prior to student teaching. Those of us working in urban education have known for many years the value of good field experiences for prospective urban teachers, and welcome such requirements.

As a result of this emphasis, a wide variety of experiences have been developed--from one or two visits to schools to eight weeks experiences in schools to full semesters devoted to school and community experiences. The emphasis in most programs, however, seems to be an overemphasis on <u>just</u> classroom experiences. Community involvement is usually held to a minimum--with many programs asking students to volunteer a set number of hours "somewhere" in the community. I believe classroom experiences prior to student teaching are essential, but I also believe--particularly for our urban treacher trainees--community experiences are just as essential, if not more so. If we put a student in an urban school for eight-ten weeks, but do not also develop a program for experiences in the community surrounding that school, we will have denied him a full preparation.

In addition, we have the opportunity to go beyond mere "exposure" or "survival" in urban field experiences, to focusing on the personal growth of our trainees. At Illinois State University, through the ISU Urban Education Program begun in 1971, we have developed a unique approach that uses the urban community experiences as a vehicle to allow students to look at their own personal strengths and weaknesses, their willingness to work with others, and their ability to develop cooperative and positive support linkages with their peers, all within the context of an off-campus experience in an urban center. In other words, we have attempted to address ourselves to the mental health component of teaching training.

The program involves predominantly secondary majors coupled with non-education majors from such fields as psychology, sociology, social work and corrections. It is a volunteer program offering a multi-cultural, off-campus, urban-oriented field experience as a pre- or post-student teaching option.

Unless we address ourselves to aspects of the mental health of our teacher trainees, we are overlooking a crucial part of their development. Many students coming into our program are not sure of their goals, have very narrow attitudes and perceptions concerning various segments of our population, and are usually working on increasing their self-confidence and self-image. If we are teaching students with such problems in our high schools, we attempt to help them work toward dealing with them and increasing their self-image, etc. The same is true of our teacher trainees. If we expect them to work with youth with some of these problems, they must be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in these areas and be given support and encouragement in dealing with them. Thus we spend a great amount of time with the student's individual growth and his relationship with others in the group.

Initially, we began developing such components of the program to bring students together because many are strangers upon entering the program. We wanted them to get to know each other as quickly as possible in order for the program to work smoothly. Now this is the overriding aspect of our program--the development of a "group" concept among trainees, the fostering of cooperation with each other, sharing with each other, and the working through of situations or relationships within the group that become difficult. We have come to use the following approaches to accomplish this within a nine-week off-campus program:

1. Orientation Week: The first week is used to allow agencies to orient students to their future roles, as well as to allow staff of the program to

orient students to the concepts of the overall program and to begin the development of group cohesiveness:

a. The first day is devoted strictly to activities fostering sharing and getting to know each other. Games, activities, discussions all center on each other, the group, etc. No mention of program schedules, etc., is made.

b. Most of the rest of the week is taken up by visiting agencies for orientation. This is done as a group--whether an individual will work for that agency or not. This gives everyone an initial contact with all agencies, as well as fostering group involvement.

c. Twice during the first week, and bi-weekly during the rest of the program, students are given work projects, usually something involving manual labor, where the group effort is necessary to accomplish the task, ranging from cleaning junk-ridden lots to painting playground equipment to cleaning the homes of the elderly. Again, the group concept is stressed in this task accomplishment, as well as providing a service to those in need.

d. Sharing rides--the group takes turns using the cars available, beginning the concept of cooperation and dependency in each other, which is carried out through the following weeks. Students are assigned in teams of two or more to each agency--some as riders, others as drivers. Since each student is given three assignments a day, working cooperatively is essential.

e. It is during this week that first four-week assignments are finalized. Using information provided in applications, preference sheets, and autobiographies turned in in advance, as well as personal interviews, each student is given assignments reflecting his/her abilities and skills, a well as needs.

Once the program is under way, students attend class twice a week with the program director. One class is devoted to the process of humanizing the classroom. Discussion of the Affective Domain, Values Clarification, and student participation in activities to point up the process of using such approaches as these is carried on. This class enables students not only to see the process

for use in the classroom, but by actually doing the activities, etc., they are able to address themselves to a clarification of their own values.

The second class is an evening seminar at which speakers, as well as program staff, direct the sessions. Each class ends in a sharing circle using "I" statements and songs--a bringing together of the group to provide "community" and closure.

The following are used on an ongoing basis throughout the program to increase feedback between program director and participants, and between participants:

1. Reaction Logs--Each day students record their reactions to that day's activities, not merely repeat where they have been, but their reactions to the activities. They are encouraged to evaluate, pose questions, and suggest change. This is viewed as another channel of communication between participant and director. These cards are handed in every week at evening seminar.

2. Feedback Notes--This was developed as a result of suggestions by participants. They felt they needed more opportunity to give and receive feedback from other participants as to how they were being perceived. As a result, we now use the follwing process: each week for the first four weeks (after orientation week) students hand in feedback notes on a number of other participants (number determined by the number of participants divided by four) so that each student does one on each participant by the fourth week. These are to be feedback on how you perceive another student. Students read these in class, and are given an opportunity to comment on whether perceptions are accurate as they see it, or request a one-on-one, a note, etc. As not all students work with each other, this forces individuals to seek out another participant to get to know them well enough to give them feedback. The first notes are usually very positive and gives everyone a good feeling. The director is involved in this

process as well, although his notes are to each student each week, and often refer to the student's reaction logs of the previous week. The second four weeks the process is repeated; with new assignments, students are now working with other participants, and therefore are able to know more of the group. The focus of these last four week notes is either constructive criticism, comments on areas of needed growth, or encouragement to continue developing an emerging strength.

3. Individual Conferences--Every two weeks students have an individual, scheduled conference with the program director. This makes for more personal feedback and evaluation.

4. Group Appraisal--An all-day session providing for peer group feedback. This is held at the end of the program, and provides for another "closing ranks" as a group. In addition to all of the above, the program staff is available throughout the program, at various hours, to assist in any "crisis" that develops, real or imagined.

5. An onging asset of the program is the fact that most students live in the same building, a converted convent used as a program base, site of all meetings, and the experience of living together and sharing daily experiences.

Although it may appear at first to be too time consuming to involve students in all the aspects of the program I have described, our placement success, as well as the growth seen in each of our participants, encourages us to continually develop additional components that will do an even better job for us in future groups. The following quote is an excerpt from a student program evaluation form, sent in after students have left the program and have had a chance to reflect on their experiences. This is a very typical excerpt, and is what encourages us to continue in the direction we have outlined:

"I feel I became more aware of my good and bad points. It gave me a good chance to look at myself as a person and figure out what I need to work on.

I feel a lot more confident about myself also. When I came into the program, I knew I would have to overcome that shyness I have. I think I did very well, too. Being away at college tends to put you in your own little world, and you tend to forget what's really going on outside in the real world. The experiences I had brought me back to reality many times and destroyed my collegiate shell.

"I learned so much about myself it's hard to really express it. The main thing that I learned was to like myself, and feel comfortable with my feelings. I can now put into use the many skills I have developed in this program and truly reach my students."

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